Liberalism and Conservatism: Fascism's Two Principal Coalition Partners

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The wide diversity among fascisms … is no reason to abandon the term. We do not doubt the utility of *communism* as a generic term because of its profoundly different expressions in, say, Russia, Italy, and Cambodia. Nor do we discard the term *liberalism* because liberal politics took dissimilar forms in free-trading, Bible-reading Victorian Britain, in the protectionist, anticlerical France of the Third Republic, or in Bismarck's aggressively united German Reich. Indeed "liberalism" would be an even better candidate for abolition than "fascism," now that Americans consider "liberals" the far Left while Europeans call "liberals" advocates of a hands-off laissez-faire free market such as Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush. Even fascism isn't as confusing as that.

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We need a clear understanding of fascism's two principal coalition partners, liberals and conservatives. I use *liberalism* in its original meaning, the meaning in use at the time when fascism rose up against it, rather than the current American usage noted above. European liberals of the early twentieth century were clinging to what had been progressive a century earlier, when the dust was still settling from the French Revolution. Unlike conservatives, they accepted the revolution's goals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, but they applied them in ways suitable for an educated middle class. Classical liberals interpreted liberty as individual personal freedom, preferring limited constitutional government and a laissez-faire economy to any kind of state intervention, whether mercantilist, as in the early nineteenth century, or socialist, as later on. Equality they understood as opportunity made accessible to talent by education; they accepted inequality of achievement and hence of power and wealth. Fraternity they considered the normal condition of free men (and they tended to regard public affairs as men's business), and therefore in no need of artificial reinforcement, since economic interests were naturally harmonious and the truth would win out in a free marketplace of ideas. This is the sense in which I use the term *liberal*, and never in its current American meaning of "far Left." Conservatives wanted order, calm, and the inherited hierarchies of wealth and birth. They shrank both from fascist mass enthusiasm and from the sort of total power fascists grasped for. They wanted obedience and deference, not dangerous popular mobilization, and they wanted to limit the state to the functions of a "night watchman" who would keep order while traditional elites ruled through property, churches, armies, and inherited social influence.

More generally, conservatives in Europe still rejected in 1930 the main tenets of the French Revolution, preferring authority to liberty, hierarchy to equality, and deference to fraternity. Although many of them might find fascists useful, or even essential, in their struggle for survival against dominant liberals and a rising Left, some were keenly aware of the different agenda of their fascist allies and felt a fastidious distaste for these uncouth outsiders. Where simple authoritarianism sufficed, conservatives much preferred that. Some of them maintained their antifascist posture to the end. Most conservatives, however, were sure that communism was worse. They would work with fascists if the Left looked otherwise likely to win. They made common cause with the fascists in the spirit of Tancredi, the recalcitrant aristocratic youth in Giuseppe di Lampedusa's great novel of the decay of a noble Sicilian family, *The Leopard*: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change."

The fascisms we have known have come into power with the help of frightened ex-liberals and opportunist technocrats and ex-conservatives, and governed in more or less awkward tandem with them.

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